

# It's in the Syllabus: Examining Syllabi Content and Course Outcomes Across Colleges

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## Abstract

Although syllabi are a common part of college courses, they can vary greatly from one professor to the next and between departments and colleges. Some syllabi are written to share basic information, some serve as contractual agreements, and others seek to motivate student interest (Parkes & Harris, 2002; Raymark & Connor-Greene, 2002). The purpose of this study was to examine the content of 200 syllabi across multiple academic colleges within a single university, to determine information included and the types of goals addressed.

## Background

The current literature on course syllabi focuses on a) what “ideal syllabi” consist of, b) student and faculty perceptions about syllabi, and c) content analysis of syllabi. The best syllabi have been described as being both contractual and a learning tool (e.g., Matejka & Kurke, 1994; Parkes & Harris, 2002). They serve as a permanent record, as well as a map or cognitive plan of the course. Students’ impressions of syllabi tend to focus the most on assignments and exams, due dates, and the grading scale, and the least on policies and readings (Marcis & Carr, 2003, 2004). They also think more highly of faculty members who include more details in their syllabi (Jenkins, Bugeja, & Barber, 2014; Saville, Zin, Brown, Marchuk, 2010). Content analyses have revealed a wide array of topics, including the types and frequency of assignments included (Graves, Hyland, & Samuels, 2010), how goals are articulated (Grauerholz & Gibson, 2006), and listings of support services available for students (Broadbent, Dorrow, & Fisch, 2007).

One limitation to this literature is that it is primarily based on small sample sizes, typically evaluating a limited number of syllabi within a single department or college. The present study was conducted to examine a large number of syllabi, across colleges and departments.

## Method

### Syllabus Collection

Collection of the course syllabi began with an email request sent to Deans of each college, department chairs, and program directors. The email introduced the authors and briefly described the study. Syllabi were requested by a) directly sending them from the program’s collection and b) sharing the email with faculty and instructors.

### Submitted Syllabi

A total of 200 syllabi were analyzed. They represented all 7 of the colleges at Bowling Green State University’s main campus and included 31 different departments/programs.

### Analyses

Two different forms of analyses were conducted: content and course outcomes.

The **content analysis** was an inductive process that began with a spreadsheet and the first syllabus. It’s content was identified and entered as separate columns in the spreadsheet. The subsequent syllabi were then entered into the spreadsheet, with previously identified content marked by a 1 and new columns added as new content was identified. As the number of columns grew, superordinate headers were used to group similar content. This process continued until all syllabi were entered.

The **course outcomes analysis** was a deductive process that was based on Fink’s Taxonomy of Significant Learning (2003), which includes the following categories:

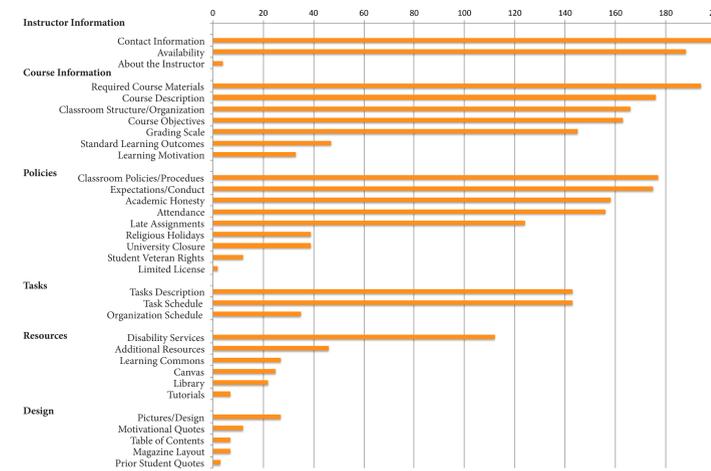
- Foundational Knowledge understanding and remembering information and ideas
- Application improvements in skills, modes of thinking, and project management
- Integration connecting ideas, people, and different aspects of life
- Human Dimension learning about oneself and others
- Caring developing new feelings, interests, and values
- Learning How to Learn becoming a better student, engaging in different types of inquiry, becoming self-directed

Each course outcome listed on the syllabi were classified into one of these categories.

The analyses began with the first and third authors independently evaluating the same 5 syllabi. They then met to compare results and discuss differences. This process was repeated with the next 5 syllabi, and then they worked individually. A list of questions and response decisions was kept to ensure consistency. The second author joined the process about midway through, following training and consensus with the first author. The first and second authors conducted the majority of the analyses, with all three authors meeting regularly to discuss issues.

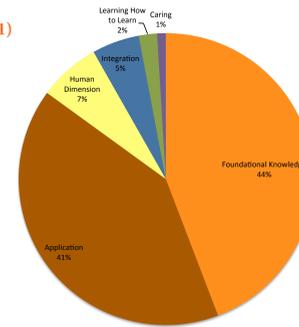
## Content Analysis

### Totals: Frequency of Occurrence



## Course Outcomes Analysis

### Totals: Percent of Total Use (n = 1,151)



## Results

### College: Percent Occurrence

	Arts & Sciences	Business Administration	Education & Human Development	Health & Human Services	Honors	Musical Arts	Technology, Architecture, & Applied Engineering	Significant $\chi^2$ Results
<b>Instructor Information</b>								
Contact Information	100%	100%	100%	93%	100%	100%	100%	
Availability	98%	100%	100%	93%	100%	100%	100%	
About the Instructor	0%	2%	0%	20%	0%	0%	0%	
<b>Course Information</b>								
Required Course Materials	98%	100%	89%	87%	100%	100%	100%	
Course Description	86%	85%	95%	100%	80%	80%	95%	
Classroom Structure/Organization	86%	83%	89%	87%	80%	80%	63%	
Course Objectives	80%	71%	89%	100%	60%	100%	95%	
Grading Scale	63%	76%	95%	80%	47%	80%	95%	$\chi^2 = 19.04, df = 6, p < 0.01$
Standard Learning Outcomes	26%	17%	53%	0%	13%	10%	32%	$\chi^2 = 10.18, df = 4, p = 0.04$
Learning Motivation	11%	20%	37%	27%	0%	0%	5%	
<b>Policies</b>								
Classroom Policies/Procedures	94%	71%	100%	93%	87%	100%	84%	
Expectations/Conduct	90%	80%	100%	87%	87%	90%	79%	
Academic Honesty	70%	76%	100%	87%	73%	90%	95%	
Attendance	84%	68%	89%	53%	67%	90%	84%	$\chi^2 = 13.08, df = 6, p = 0.04$
Late Assignments	58%	59%	84%	60%	47%	90%	63%	
Religious Holidays	23%	5%	58%	7%	20%	30%	0%	$\chi^2 = 21.10, df = 4, p < 0.01$
University Closure	28%	17%	21%	7%	13%	10%	5%	
Student Veteran Rights	9%	2%	16%	7%	0%	0%	0%	
Limited License	0%	0%	0%	13%	0%	0%	0%	
<b>Tasks/Schedule</b>								
Tasks Description	69%	78%	74%	87%	80%	80%	42%	
Task Schedule	77%	66%	84%	93%	80%	60%	32%	$\chi^2 = 22.71, df = 6, p < 0.01$
Organization Schedule	14%	20%	5%	13%	7%	10%	58%	
<b>Resources</b>								
Disability Services	59%	32%	89%	67%	47%	90%	42%	$\chi^2 = 26.21, df = 6, p < 0.01$
Additional Resources	28%	22%	32%	20%	13%	30%	0%	
Learning Commons	21%	5%	16%	13%	13%	10%	0%	
Canvas	22%	5%	0%	13%	0%	10%	11%	
Library	19%	5%	16%	7%	0%	10%	0%	
Tutorials	2%	5%	0%	20%	0%	0%	0%	
<b>Design</b>								
Pictures/Design	20%	5%	21%	27%	7%	0%	0%	
Motivational Quotes	6%	7%	5%	13%	7%	0%	0%	
Table of Contents	0%	0%	21%	13%	0%	10%	0%	
Magazine Layout	1%	0%	16%	20%	0%	0%	0%	
Prior Student Quotes	0%	0%	5%	13%	0%	0%	0%	

### College: Frequency of Outcome per Syllabus

	Arts & Sciences	Business Administration	Education & Human Development	Health & Human Services	Honors	Musical Arts	Technology, Architecture, & Applied Engineering	Significant Kruskal Wallis & Paired Wilcoxon Results
Foundational Knowledge	1.86 *	2.10	2.89	4.13 *	1.53	3.00	5.37	$\chi^2 = 18.31, df = 6, p < 0.01$
Application	2.42	1.56 *	3.58	2.47	1.07	2.10	3.58 *	$\chi^2 = 19.03, df = 6, p < 0.01$
Integration	0.35	0.27	1.05	0.40	0.27	0.00	0.47	
Human Dimension	0.28	0.12	0.74	0.33	0.33	0.40	0.21	
Caring	0.10	0.05	0.16	0.33	0.13	0.20	0.05	
Learning How to Learn	0.00	0.12	0.16	0.07	0.13	0.00	0.00	

## Discussion

The majority of content within the syllabi matched with traditional, teacher-centered syllabi. This included features such as the instructor’s name, availability, course description, required materials, course objectives, policies and procedures, conduct, academic honesty, and attendance. Very few of the syllabi contained features that are associated with learner-centered teaching (Bain, 2004; O’Brien, Mills, & Cohen, 2008), such as information about the instructor, learning motivation, organization schedule, images, and student or motivational quotes.

The course outcomes in the syllabi emphasized goals related to foundational knowledge and application. Some included integration and human dimension goals, but very few addressed caring or learning how to learn.

These results suggest that faculty at the university are producing very similar syllabi, which may be beneficial to students so they know what to expect. It is unclear if the small number of learner-centered features and lack of variety in course outcome types within these syllabi indicates a scarcity of these forms of teaching at the university or an absence of their inclusion on the syllabi.